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Durkheim and the Internet: On Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination. Jan Blommaert. London: New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. xii + 123pp.

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Durkheim did not predict the internet, nor is his digitized mind being recreated in a computer lab somewhere through machine learning, but Jan Blommaert's *Durkheim and the Internet* returns to the thinker's century-old insights to better understand the future of the sociology of language. The book, composed of two lengthy chapters and three short framing ones, makes the claim that practices on the internet and cyberspace are just as bound by social norms and pervaded by sociolinguistic indexicals as other sites of sociolinguistic analysis. For anyone involved in research on the internet, or who has simply spent time on the internet, this may not come as much of a surprise, given the preponderance of norms, etiquette, and social tiffs that accompany any incursion into virtual space. But Blommaert aims to fortify the position of sociolinguistics in these discussions in two ways. First, he shows how the stock-and-trade terms of the field that have been useful for describing the dynamics of globalization are not just applicable to internet sociality, but necessary for making analytic sense of the seemingly globally convergent spaces of internet-based communication. Second, he claims that modern-day sociolinguistics is the genealogical heir to Durkheim's project of understanding the social fact, and hence primed to study the new kinds of sociological formations that globalization and technological convergence

are bringing to bear. These two claims tie together to suggest new insights into both interaction on the internet and sociolinguistics as an intellectual project.

The book's subtitle, *On Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination*, provides a good insight into what the second claim is really about. Blommaert argues that norms, sociology's trusted territory, are primarily found within linguistically mediated interaction where the nuances of moral judgments, normative identities, and behavioral types play out. If interaction is the true space of normative regulation, then sociolinguistics is the true form of sociology. Blommaert is highly critical of a certain strand of Parsonian sociology which mistook order for social structure and sought integration in enduring social institutions bound by core values. For Blommaert, social interaction itself is the site of order – namely through the “ordered indexicalities” of emergent interactional spaces (pp. 20-28). In this light, as macro-forces like globalization and technological innovation have upset the traditional sociological unit (if there ever, indeed, was one), the new aim of sociology is to understand the emergence of norms in these spaces of cross-cultural convergence, like the multi-billion user domain of Facebook. Sociolinguistics, Blommaert argues, is best primed to study these kinds of encounters.

Platforms like Instagram or Reddit involve stranger-interactants from around the world, but are nevertheless bound by strict, if emergent, norms and behavioral scripts. As Blommaert notes, “whereas common wisdom would often qualify mobile phone texting codes and Facebook interactions as ‘anything goes’...a more concentrated analysis shows that even such apparently open, highly diverse, free, and unscripted communicative spaces are very rapidly filled with ad hoc (and rapidly solidified) norms...” (p. 26). I'm not sure they were ever meant as sites of ‘anything goes’ (one would have to go to further reaches of the internet perhaps), but one can see how normative strictures have often been left out of discussion of, say, the broader narratives of

the internet as a presumably ‘open’ place for communication, creativity, and exploration. For Blommaert, the internet is not post-social but presents “a new type of social formation” whereby communities do socialize members, develop recognizable registers, and of course, establish social norms (p. 71). As Blommaert notes, “online sociality...has not replaced the Goffmanian world of social interaction – the mix has changed” (p. 83, emphasis in original). In this sense, communication on the internet is not a limit case for an interaction-minded or variationist sociolinguistics; it is the best argument for sociolinguistics *as* sociology.

Yet here lies an issue: in the book’s framing, the internet operates as both radical newness and unremarkable familiarity. Internet communities become analyzable within a sociolinguistic frame because they exhibit those qualities of classical sociological objects that Durkheim would have recognized (communities with norms) but exude just enough qualities of global freshness to make them different from the classical sociological community marked by “thick” relations. Tellingly, the cases Blommaert focuses on resemble many of those that readers of previous works of his would recognize: multilingual communities whose users have competing norms which stratify users through multiple indexically-invoked and scalar hierarchies, but through which some actors seek out new forms of social mobility (often involving global registers of English). One is left with the strange juxtaposition that the internet is unlike offline spaces of sociality (because of the presumed “lightness” of online relationships) yet worthy of study precisely because it replicates normativity, the thing so valued in so-called “thick” communities. Leaving aside some of the book’s presumptions about the homogenous qualities of internet sociality around the world, this framing necessitates the continued prominence of two classical sociolinguistic objects: communities and interactions. While there are conventional labels for things like “Facebook communities” and “Facebook interactions,” it is not clear we should treat

them in the same manner as their more conventional reference objects. And likewise, the nature of “talking” or “interacting” online elides a considerable amount of complexity in terms of participant structure, language ideology, and technological design.

This framing may be fine for analyzing interactions on mobile phones and internet chatrooms where the codes and norms can be methodically untangled using conventional tools; however, it may rule out other possibilities for sociolinguistic analysis elsewhere. There is, for instance, another area of the internet strongly governed by language ideology, fixed rules, and elite control, one that Blommaert opposes to his own sociolinguistic project: the study of algorithms. Algorithms, he notes, are anachronistic artifacts of rational choice thinking that arbitrarily use rules to generate ersatz identities, community formations, and indexical suppositions about users – supposedly different from the intersubjective and interactional acts of *human* agency that comprise the core space of norm-genesis. But as anthropologists and others have shown (e.g., “Toward an Anthropology of Computer-Mediated, Algorithmic Forms of Sociality,” Eitan Wilf, *Current Anthropology* 2013: 716-739; *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Safia Noble, NYU Press, 2018) algorithms are deeply involved in the production of identities online and in the shape of online interaction. Furthermore, critical studies of algorithms are devoted primarily to revealing the social norms behind algorithms, such as assumptions that programmers have about certain kinds of users. This harkens us back not to the Durkheim of the social fact, but to the Durkheim of arbitrary cultural categories: power relations impose categories often at the expense of the individual or specific social groups. The fact that these algorithmic impositions happen outside the space of discursive interaction and named communities means that there may be some limits to the ‘communities that interact’ model.

It is worth discussing who this book is ultimately for. *Durkheim and the Internet* is addressed to sociologists, written as a defense of sociolinguistics, positioned against economics, while drawing primarily on linguistic anthropological theory. All four disciplines occupy staged positions in these arguments. For instance, Blommaert posits that the main threats to the modern sociolinguistic project are Rational Choice Theory and Methodological Individualism, which represent “fundamental denial[s] of Durkheim’s ‘social fact’” (p. 15), even while he acknowledges that such theoretical approaches “never made a real inroad into sociolinguistics” (p. 15). Nor should we be under the assumption that they held total sway in European or American sociology either; their state in economics too has long been challenged. Likewise, a Durkheimian-inflected sociolinguistics is cast as the true form of sociology, in part because sociolinguistics provides a “highly precise focus” (p. 86) on an “empirically solid basis” (p. 43) with “extremely accurate analysis” (p. 95). Such a defense of analytical reliability might be expected, ironically, on the quantitative side of sociology, or within particular strands of variationist sociolinguistics. I’m not sure that claims of sociolinguistics to be more “accurate” benefit the kind of sociolinguistics Blommaert is actually advocating, which is more interested in the clashes of indexical systems in global encounters, and not, say, intercoder reliability. Lastly, linguistic anthropology may find itself flattered to be included as the bedrock of modern sociolinguistic theory. However, linguistic anthropology subsumed *as* sociolinguistics and, by presumption, *as* sociology, may ring differently for different readers.

Nevertheless, readers will find a fresh take on the lineage of sociolinguistics, the field’s relationship to conventional sociology, and its broader theoretical remit; whether this lineage can also carry sociolinguistics into new kinds of empirical futures is an open question. As much as

sociolinguistics may be the true science of understanding norms, it too may also be bound by its own norms of the past.